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SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF WHTI AIR RULE--TWO WEEKS ON AND
NO BIG PROBLEMS

REF: A) VANCOUVER 058 B) TORONTO 038 C) TORONTO 036

D) HALIFAX 002 E) CALGARY 014 F) VANCOUVER
035 G) QUEBEC 009 H) OTTAWA 108

¶1. (U) Two weeks after the January 23 implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) rule requiring U.S.-bound air travelers to hold a passport as proof of identity and citizenship, there have been no serious problems or delays reported at any of Canada's airports. Having been advised of the DHS phased-in implementation period (whereby travelers who are qualified in all respects except possession of a passport will be admitted to the U.S.), air carriers have allowed passengers to board or go to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) preclearance without a passport. As it turned out, by January 29 over 99 percent of Canadian and American U.S.-bound air travelers checking in at Canadian airports did have passports. The chaos and disruptions anticipated by many, including the media, did not materialize.

¶2. (U) Consulates across Canada have reported on the initial implementation of the January 23 air rule and filed subsequent updates with Embassy Ottawa. The small number of passengers who checked in without passports (or had expired passports) were allowed to board after being given the passport requirement information and advised to obtain a passport. In only three instances were passengers denied boarding, and two of these three appear not to be WHTI-related denials. Implementation has been variously described by CBP officers, airlines, and airport authorities as "problem-free," "a non-issue," "painless," and "a non-event event."

¶3. (U) Canadian media representatives present at the airports looking for delays and long queues, irate passengers, or "horror stories," were disappointed. There were no big problems. Passengers at some airports were in visibly good spirits, possibly because the anticipated hassle at check-in did not occur. One reporter expressed disappointment that there was no story--everything was going fine. Though WHTI implementation was not considered newsworthy, the delay in issuance of passports to Canadian citizens was, and several stories have run on that problem over the past two weeks.

¶4. (U) On January 25, Ambassador Wilkins sent his congratulations to Mission Canada employees for the successful implementation of the WHTI air rule. He noted that this team effort--in publicity and outreach to inform the public, and in talking with airlines, airport authorities, and Canadian government officials--had averted the confusion which many expected. Now we turn our sights to

the 2008 implementation of the WHTI land and sea rule, and the debate over "acceptable alternative documents" that might be used in lieu of a passport.

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WILKINS